

Interview for “Their Stories: Lowell’s Youth and The Refugee Experience”

Date: November 1, 2013

Place: International Institute

Interviewee: Bawi Za Kham (from Burma)

Interviewer: Stephanie Sullivan and Gyu Bin Lee, UMass Lowell students

(Recording 1)

Stephanie: So you need to say your name, your age, and which country you’re from?

Bawi: My name is Bawi Za Kham and I’m 19, I’m from Burma.

Stephanie: Ok, great. So would you like to share the circumstances and events in your life and your family’s life that lead your family to choose to move to the United States?

Bawi: Uh... it really is a long story. In July 2007, I made a list of steps that I hope to achieve. And also what I wanted to do for my cousins and how I was going to help them. So I was prepared for it, the poverty and dangerous situations. I make the list, I make the list because this was the year that I lost, who I love the most and who I needed the most in the world and my life was full of miseries, misery. And the event in my life was full of misery. I realize it was not the end of my life. And I was there from 12, I was 12 when I lost grandmother. I was living in the village named “Aso,” it’s in Chin state, one of the poorest state in Burma. Chin state, Aso is like small village, where I was born, located in mountain range, there is no electricity, no running water, and expensive of, education was really expensive. And in Burma, only 30 percent of children attend school, only 30 percent of children go to school, and in 30 percent only 5 to 10 percent graduate from high school. Sometimes, I used to spend 3 weeks at a time hunting animals and hiking to the border of India to be able to go to school because I didn’t have any money to the expensive of education. When I lost my grandmother, I tried to leave the country because I could not walk pass the place that she was buried every day. And she told me that, my grandmother told me that, told me all the time that she didn’t want to die until I grew up and able to take care of myself. My wish was leave Burma and go to Malaysia and find a job, the most importantly go to college, university. Then in 2008, it was like time for me to go to Malaysia and because I need that I have to leave my village to go to Malaysia because my mother was not there to take care of me. And only my uncle had [inaudible] to send to school, if I stayed there stayed there I would have been forced into the child labor, or forced to become a soldier for the Burmese army. So I had to leave. And when I got to Malaysia, I worked like 12 hours a day and

seven days a week. And uh... I did not have an opportunity to attend school in Malaysia when I was in Malaysia. When I was staying with thirty people in one apartment, I only had to pay 50 ringgit a month. And I always realized that we were charged only... because . And then I got, the money I sent off my money to my cousins so that they could stay in school. So in 2011, they were six students graduate from high school in my village. So five of them were my cousins, so I was so proud of myself because they I feel that they graduate from high school because of me. I sent the money. I was in Malaysia. Uh... can we start over?

Stephanie: Yeah.

Bawi: First of all, when I was three, maybe a month, I don't know, my parents, they divorced so I was staying with my uncle's family. And my father got married to the other woman and had his own family, my mother got married to the other man. But I didn't know that my parents were divorced because my uncle and my aunt were like my parents. I called them my... I thought they were my mother, they were my parents, I thought like they were my father and my mother. Because I never stayed with my parents because my father is from the other village, my father is a teacher, so he has to move to the village every year. And I never really talk to my father and my mother. And my mother leave, went to Malaysia in 2006. In 2008, I intend to go Malaysia because of my grandmother and also my mother wasn't able to take care of me.

Stephanie: So what was that like, how did you feel about that?

Bawi: So, since I was like five or so, I wanted to go to college, I wanted to, I always wanted to go to school. So my uncle have like five children to send to school. So I knew that my uncle was not gonna be able to pay for my school. So, uh... I went to hunt and then take all the animal to India, the border of India because their exchange rate was better.

Stephanie: So, when you came to the United States, what surprised you? What was different to you, like how did your life change after you came to the United States?

Bawi: When I got to, I was so happy that I was able to go to school without paying anything for free. That's yeah, that is.

Stephanie: What are you looking forward to in your future now?

Bawi: I'm looking forward to going college, and then become civil engineer. So I can go back to Chin state where I was born and then help them build a bridge and something else.

Stephanie: That's great. How has your lifestyle changed since you've been in the United States?

Bawi: It changed a lot, when I got here. I was not able to speak English, even a word. But I still learn English, I wanted to be able to speak English since I was 6 years old. And then I'm so happy that I'm starting to speak English.

Stephanie: What's been your biggest challenge since moving to the United States?

Bawi: Um... it was not being able to speak the language and not being able to communicate with others.

Stephanie: So what do you miss about your homelands?

Bawi: I..., what I miss about my homeland is that, I miss all of my friends, my cousins, my family and my father. And I also miss the way we take care of each other. In Chin state, we are all like a family even though they are not part of my family. They are all like a family to me. We share everything in Chin state, the way I miss a lot the way we take care of each other.

Stephanie: Yeah, um... What kind of, what are some of the cultural traditions do you think you want to keep and pass on to your family when you have one?

Bawi: Oh... I want to keep, I always wanted to keep the way we take care of each other. For example, in my culture, if you need something and I have it, then I give it you to for free. And we all are generous and we even when we sick, we take care of each other.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's awesome.

Bawi: And I also, I always go to church on Sunday. Almost every Sunday but it's for me and my family because if you go to church on Sunday, it's very important because if I was, if I was not Christian, I won't be able to here, I won't be here

Stephanie: Right. What inspires you, what gives you inspiration in life?

Bawi: Uh... it's always been my grandmother, it's always been my grandmother, she was telling me how to be positive, not complaining about anything, she was, my grandmother was always who was inspired to me.

(Recording 2)

Stephanie: Ok, so you left from Malaysia in 2008. Do you want to repeat what you're saying because it's recording.

Bawi: I left my village in 2008 then I went to India and after that I went to Thailand, and after I went to Singapore. I was in Singapore for 25 days. After that I went to Malaysia. When I was in Malaysia I was working 12 hours a day. And sometimes...

Stephanie: Where did you work?

Bawi: I was in construction, and I was working mostly 7 days a week. So my cousins could stay in school. Because, so that they don't have to go through work, where I have been to. Then I came to the United States in 2010. Then after 2010, when I got a job, I was almost 17 and I studied school when I was 17.

Stephanie: So you started school here when you were 17? And you had to learn English after...

Bawi: Yeah, I had to learn English when I got here. I was not speaking even I were, was trying was really trying so hard to be able to speak English.

Stephanie: And now, now you're speaking it. It's awesome.

Bawi: We all need each other like, pass the ball, the ball, pass the ball to someone is important and benefit. And it can change their whole life. And it's impossible to school, to go. Without pass each other, without help each other. That's what I sent my money to my cousins, I believe they are going to help each other. So they go to school for our community and I assist them by passing the ball for opportunity for all of us. Think, I believe we must take times passing the ball and going to school.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah, I agree about you saying people helping each other like it's so important, especially when I think of United States tends to be really, you know, every man for himself kind of thing. Like everyone, you know, there is not a lot of people helping each other as much. So yeah, everything that you're saying about how important it is to help each other, is really true. I agree with you.



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RELEASE

I, (Print name) Bawi Za Kham, hereby
authorize the University of Massachusetts to record my voice and use my
name and biography for educational activities and as part of the "Mill Girls
and Immigrants" museum exhibit at Lowell National Historical Park. I
further authorize the University of Massachusetts to edit, to copy, to use
and to re-use the recording and transcript, in whole or in part for
presentation, exhibition, publication, and electronic and mechanical
distribution in perpetuity.

I understand that I will receive no monetary compensation for the rights
granted herein.

Accepted and agreed to: (Signed) Bawi Za Kham

Date: 06.26.2014

Witnessed by: (signed) Susan Thomeen

Date: 6/26/2014